

EMMA SDEGNO

*Shakespeare and Victorian Essayism:
'A Note of Provinciality'*

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Sharing the basic assumptions of Victorian nonfictional literature, Shakespearean essayism is characterized by a strong militant urge. The major Victorian “sages” made the Renaissance playwright into a cultural and political object starting from the main terms of the Romantic reading of Shakespeare which they corrected and adapted to their own poetics and to their own time’s purposes, through references that, sometimes synthetic and allusive, often imply the bulk of early nineteenth-century critical literature. This intense intertextual dialogue with Romanticism is certainly due to the pervasiveness and revolutionary nature of the Romantics’ rehabilitation of Shakespeare, as it has been widely observed (Bate 1992:1-35; Marzola 1992: 7-19; Ascari 2005: 151-52), but the particular circumstances of publication of some fundamental texts of Romantic criticism on Shakespeare, which came first to light around the 1840s, should not be overlooked either. Since all of Coleridge’s lectures on literature appeared in different editions well into the Victorian age,¹ it appears that from 1840 to 1860 Romantic and Victorian

¹ Henry Nelson Coleridge’s 4-volume edition of S.T. Coleridge *Literary Remains*, published in the years 1836-39, devoted volume 2 to the unpublished materials of Coleridge’s 1818 lectures on Shakespeare. In 1849, in the volume *Notes and Lectures on Shakespeare*, Sara Coleridge brought to light some other notes concerning

views on Shakespeare were in some way contemporary, confronting some of the aesthetic issues raised by his work from different standpoints. Recent studies have demonstrated that the Romantics' appreciation of Shakespeare was a well-oriented political act, and it is also stated that one of the prerogatives of Romantic criticism was the attempt to "universalize" Shakespeare, thereby placing him at one remove from the heated political controversies of the time (Marzola 1992: 10). The process of Shakespeare's canonization by the Romantics therefore turned the figure of the Renaissance playwright into a national icon, and subsequently into a universal figure (Mercer and Kujawinska-Courtney 2003). The Victorians, instead, openly made Shakespeare into a political and cultural issue, dragging him, so to say, within the cross-fire of contemporary battlefields. This is an aspect that well reveals the Victorians' concern with an ideologically-based approach to Shakespeare's work which we not only tend to think of as typical of late twentieth-century criticism, but which was also until recently thought to have contributed to the national myth of the Bard. In this paper I shall be referring to three essays which, in different ways, have considered Shakespeare as a Victorian cultural issue, namely Thomas Carlyle's "The Hero as a Poet. Dante and Shakespeare" (1840), Walter Bagehot's "Shakespeare – the Man" (1853), and John Ruskin's Lecture 5 in *Munera Pulveris* (1862). The first two documents helped to build the monument of Shakespeare, yet show evidence, as I shall demonstrate, of some difficulty in bringing him into line with nineteenth-century cultural codes, while Ruskin's piece seems to reveal the inapplicability of Shakespeare's system of values in the context of a discourse on contemporary labour conditions. The long reference to Shakespeare in Ruskin's passage was quoted in full by Matthew Arnold, in his essay "The Literary Influences of Academies", as an illustration of a typically British "note of Provinciality" (1864: 251-52).

Carlyle's lecture in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* strongly contributed to the identification of Shakespeare with the British nation. After laying down the basic coordinates of his vision of the poet, as politician, thinker, legislator, philosopher combined, and referring to Col-

Coleridge's 1811-1812 London and 1813 Bristol lectures. Some further material on Coleridge's 1811-1812 London lectures on Shakespeare appeared in 1856 in John Payne Collier's *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, a transcription of the notes Collier himself declared he had taken, which raised a lively controversy. See Coburn (1987: 5, I, 164-65).

eridge's concept of "musical thought" (1897: 83), Carlyle presents his piece of comparative criticism, placing Dante near Shakespeare, and thus changing the most frequent Coleridgean association between Dante and Milton, in order to endow Shakespeare with a political unifying function. At the end of the lecture this Dante-Shakespeare pairing reveals its political as well as cultural potential: Shakespeare, although not mentioned, is viewed as a warrant and a rebuke to contemporary Britain, implicitly confronting an Italy which, "poor", "dismembered" and "scattered" though it be, "is actually *one*: Italy can speak!" (114). It is remarkable that Carlyle begins his treatment of Shakespeare from an acknowledgement of his reputation, and not from an urge to defend his greatness against adverse judgements as was the case with the Romantics. Carlyle has no need to fight any battles to introduce Shakespeare within the canon; because he has been fully rehabilitated, he can proceed with his "hero-making", presenting him as a figure endowed with a transcendental role to play in the world.

Before dealing with each poet individually, Carlyle summarily hints at the points they have in common, which concern their "beatification" by the world — "nay here in these ages, such as they are, Dante and Shakespeare are a peculiar two. They dwell apart, in a kind of royal solitude; none equal, none second to them: in the general feeling of the world, a certain transcendentalism, a glory as of complete perfection invests these two. They are canonized [...]" (85). Then, in a rather circular assertion, he states that the present "utmost unheroic" times still demonstrate their reverence for heroism by worshipping these two poets. At the same time, he proceeds to adopt, restate and sometimes overturn certain statements of the Romantic aesthetic, through hyperbolic and paradoxical style and imagery. Within the framework of the political discourse, Carlyle looks at some of the basic assumptions of Romantic criticism, namely the "unconsciousness" of Shakespeare's genius, and his association with nature, but, at the same time, his reading gives a Carlylean 'twist' to these two notions. He talks about the quality of unconsciousness as Shakespeare's true greatness, in terms that are charged with biblical and prophetic overtones: "he was a wild Arab lion of the desert, and did speak-out with that great thundervoice of his, not by words which he *thought* to be great, but by actions, by feelings, by a history which *were* great!" (104). What makes Shakespeare a "natural" phenomenon is not only the unconscious quality of his genius, but also the complexity of his imaginative faculties and his purely instinctual "morality". In fact, implicitly reconsidering the distinction Coleridge made between fancy and imagination, Carlyle proposes an all-inclusive formula which views all faculties as inter-

connected in a “physiognomical” relationship, a term that suggests the idea of race, a domain where the natural and the cultural actually overlap. “[W]hat we call imagination, fancy, understanding, and so forth, are but different figures of the same Power of Insight, all indissolubly connected with each other, *physiognomically* related; that if we knew one of them, we might know them all” (106). The identification between the natural and the moral is restated in a continuous shift of roles and planes. Not only is a man’s morality a prerequisite for his knowledge of nature — “a man who is completely immoral cannot know anything. Nature is sealed to him, he can know just mean things” (Ibid.) — but it is also rooted in nature, making it a non-exclusively human and cultural prerogative. In one of his characteristic unexpected associations, Carlyle evokes a fox’s “morality” by analogy. He is undoubtedly here echoing and elaborating Hazlitt’s definition of “natural morality” in relation to the character of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, a reading which had managed to find an ethical justification for the play for the first time (Hazlitt 1983: 224-25). However, the implications of Carlyle’s discourse aim to give new sense to certain Romantic assumptions: on the one hand, rather than universalizing Shakespeare, by repeated reference to “physiognomy”, as we have seen, Carlyle was demonstrating how deeply rooted Shakespeare was in the British race, while, on the other hand, he was reformulating Coleridge’s concept of organic unity — “his morality and insight are of the same dimensions; different faces of the same unity of vulpine life” (99) — and, taking a typically mid-Victorian anti-solipsistic stance, Carlyle sees Shakespeare as the embodiment of a ferine Nature, whose morality is at odds with introspection and with the pursuit of individual ends:

If he spent his time in *splenetic atrabiliar reflections* on his own misery, his ill usage by Nature, Fortune and other Foxes, and so forth; and had not courage, promptitude, practicality, and other suitable vulpine gifts and graces, he would catch no geese. We may say of the Fox too, that his morality and insight are of the same dimensions; different faces of the same unity of vulpine life! (107)

Carlyle’s discourse approached Shakespeare’s work in general and non analytical terms, and developed two of the main concerns of Victorian criticism. The reference to Shakespeare’s unconsciousness aptly fits within what Philip Davis has defined as the “widespread Victorian [...] tendency to considering [Shakespeare] as an almost pre-conscious thinker” (2003: 91), being a mid-nineteenth-century development of the Romantic declaration of his natural

genius. Also the moral theme is a central topic of Shakespearean criticism,² and in Carlyle's treatment of it we can perceive an attempt to come to terms with that epistemic lack of words and concepts which often made Victorian critics unable to assimilate certain components of Shakespeare's work through critical language (Davis 2003: 94-95). In order to root the ethical in the natural instinctual element, Carlyle was searching for analogies that might enlarge the boundaries within which the term could be valid, a search for a unitary and yet broad enough definition that could comprehend Shakespeare's multifaceted incarnations.

Rather than shaping a Victorian view of Shakespeare, Bagehot's essay offers a summary of its most common traits. Presenting a re-reading of the basic Romantic assumptions through the lenses provided by mid-nineteenth-century aesthetic canons, the essay gives a comprehensive view of Shakespeare, with the clear aim of making him a contemporary Victorian writer. Flattening the historical, political and even the critical perspectives, Bagehot helped to consolidate the Shakespearean myth, thereby participating in the phenomenon of reinforcing the cultural and political establishment.

The essay begins by attacking François Guizot for failing to make contemporary historical events as well as his political career surface through his criticism on Shakespeare, a reproach which, fitting within the "militant" urge, also renewed the opposition between the French and British mindsets and methods which had widely characterized early eighteenth-century discourse on Shakespeare (Bate 1992: 1-35; Simpson 1993). By highlighting all the characteristics that had made Shakespeare a Victorian contemporary, Bagehot supports his assertions with unidentified quotations defining Shakespeare himself as an "experimentalist". Having posited and made sweeping value judgements about the fundamental difference between the "doctrinaire's" and the experimental approaches to reality, and having asserted that Shakespeare was a "practical man", Bagehot unfolds the main lines of what we now call "the aesthetic of particularity" that Shakespeare's work is seen to embody (1879: 129). Shakespeare is therefore presented both as a typically British and perfectly contemporary artist, also through a continuous as-

² See Ralli (1932: II, 257-58). In his extensive treatment of Shakespearean criticism, Ralli highlights it as the major preoccupation of the central decades of the century, although, rather significantly, he cuts Carlyle's animal analogy and reference to physiognomy from Carlyle's extended account, thus reducing the implications of his discourse.

sociation with Walter Scott, and Keats, as well as Milton (131), and by focussing on some key-objects of Romantic and Post-Romantic aesthetic, namely the representation of nature and of ordinary folk. Shakespeare's promotion to Post-Romantic artist is definitely sanctioned by the contrast made between him and Milton through an analogy to landscape painting. This contrast evokes the opposition between the neoclassical and Romantic pictorial canons, between a Milton who selected his objects carefully, and depicted them after a long period of studying and training, and Shakespeare's impulsive, natural genius, which could describe anything that came to hand "without effort" (134). Bagehot devotes the bulk of his essay to the second major topic, the representation of commoners. The Shakespeare-Scott parallel now foregrounds their typically British sense of humour, a quality utterly foreign to Goethe, who looked down on the lower orders with a detached "scientific eye" (142). Bagehot imagines Shakespeare and Scott spending an entire day walking about and talking to people. Shakespeare's familiarity with ordinary people, qualified in terms of "excess" — "an excessive tendency to dwell on the common features of ordinary lives", thus betraying a certain ambivalence about the subject — focuses on the topic of imaginative language. Bagehot repeatedly stresses the "illogical" nature of the language spoken by Shakespeare's "low" characters, debating with Coleridge about its source, seeing it as stemming from experience rather than from imagination as Coleridge had averred, and relating it once again to a typically English matrix (146). Shakespeare therefore becomes the leading exponent of the "anti-logical" attitude, which is initially presented as a national feature, and subsequently as a typically female element. Referring to Plato's "typically masculine" dialogic mode, he praises Shakespeare's more versatile ability to reproduce women's speech and their "anti-logical" mode of thought perfectly, given that it was also "essentially his own" (165). Bagehot's argument of "illogical" language appears in part as a reformulation of the idea of Shakespeare's natural and unconscious genius, as well as a way of dismissing the contemporary currents of British rationalism. Not only did he attribute the "logical" attitude to a foreign and French mindset, but he also defined Richard Whately's *Treatise of Logic* (1832) as non-representative of the British character, thus rather significantly failing to mention other more recent and influential works, such as John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic* (1843).

Bagehot faces ideological issues in two ways, both aiming to give a picture of Shakespeare that would promote order and stability, thus keeping him at one remove from the heated contemporary political and religious contro-

versies. On the one hand, he touches upon the major political topics, such as the country's constitution, the universal suffrage, the legitimacy of the monarchy, and his attitude towards the middle-classes, maintaining Shakespeare's conservative and aristocratic position (160), thereby reinforcing that process of the "gentrification of Shakespeare" that has been shown to have started with Coleridge (Bate: 1992). On the other hand, he employs a form of argumentation that juxtaposes different and contrasting aspects of Shakespeare's personality, thereby tending to smooth away any problematic tension and openness of the plays. After insisting on Shakespeare's proximity to the lower classes and on his extroverted and sociable nature, he starts to describe his solitary, melancholic and aristocratic side which surfaced through his fanciful, and most unpractical, "Keatsean" plays of "fairies and goblins". As for Shakespeare's attitude towards religion, Bagehot maintains his non-sectarian position and "lighter religiosity", in contrast to what he defines as Carlyle's "grim" view. By indirectly evoking the climate of controversies in which Shakespeare often appeared as a major exponent of opposite parties, Bagehot aims to give a balanced vision of Shakespeare which would assure the stability of a set of values on which British culture might rely.³ The identification between Shakespeare and the nation, which is continuously reiterated in the essay, is accomplished at the end through a description of England's fields and meadows, which are identified as the places to look for the final truth about Shakespeare's characters.

If the most celebratory essays we have examined so far may demonstrate how certain issues raised by Shakespeare's plays seemed hard to accept, and even name, Ruskin's treatment is a most remarkable example of the difficulty inherent in accommodating the issues they raised within theoretical frameworks that might have contemporary relevance. Ruskin's lecture seems to betray the uneasiness which Shakespeare provoked in the Victorians, and which Nina Auerbach has effectively described as a "thorn in the Establish-

³ If Carlyle saw him as "the melodious Priest of a *true* Catholicism", and a powerful religious unifying vessel, "of a 'Universal Church' of the Future and of all times" (1888: 111), in his lectures on poetry delivered at Oxford in 1832 and 1841, John Keble (1912) saw Shakespeare as an anti-puritan polemist, a defender of "rank and religion" who was actively involved in contemporary religious controversies. From the standpoint of British Catholicism, in one of his 1851 *Lectures Upon the Present Position of Catholics in England*, namely "The Protestant Tradition finds Support in the Tradition", John Henry Newman (2000) identified Shakespeare as one of the leading figures, with Milton and Bunyan, who had contributed to the formation of British protestant nationalism.

ment's side".⁴ For Matthew Arnold, Shakespeare was an extremely dangerous model. His need to distance himself from Shakespeare is a constant pre-occupation in his literary essays, especially those written in 1864, the year of Shakespeare's tercentenary, namely "Heinrich Heine", "The Literary Influence of Academies", "On the Study of Celtic Literature". Aiming to bring contemporary poetry to forms of classical purity, Arnold had to dismiss Shakespeare as a poetical model, acknowledging his dramatic qualities but casting a shadow of disapproval over his use of language. He also made a well-known attack on a passage of Ruskin's Shakespearean criticism, finding fault with its "eruptive" and "aggressive" tone and its "barbarously rich and imaginatively superabundant" sentences, which appeared so remote from the French "attic, prose of the centre". In distancing himself from those features of English culture which were epitomized by Ruskin's writing, Arnold was implicitly, and involuntarily, denouncing the difficulty inherent in Ruskin's approach.

Ruskin dealt with Shakespeare extensively, and also in a way, analytically.⁵ Especially in his later works, he referred to specific passages from Shakespeare's plays, reading them in the light of his favourite authors and relating them to the main social and political concerns with which he was then obsessed. What is particularly interesting about Ruskin's comparative reading, however, is that his interpretations, which provide sometimes valuable and hermeneutically sound keys to the texts, appear to provide an indirect and hazy illumination of the contemporary scene. A long passage on *The Tempest* in lecture 5, "On Government" from *Munera Pulveris*, is an outstanding example of his "bifocal" attitude, as I shall show by means of some observations about the formal organization of the text and its imagery.

The passage quoted by Arnold as striking "a note of provinciality" consti-

⁴ "Many of our contemporaries assume that he was a bully, an Imperialist insignia, an apologist for Anglo-Saxon supremacy, a particularly grandiose nineteenth-century ideal of Britannia. To actual Victorians, however, at least for those who were writers, Shakespeare was often a thorn in the Establishment's side [...]. Far from being a triumphant vessel of unilateral Bardolatry, implicitly belittling cultural outsiders, the Victorian Shakespeare spoke opaque language for the silenced dispossessed" (Marshall and Poole 2003: viii).

⁵ See O' Gorman (2003: 203-18). The essay deals especially with Ruskin's later works and in particular *Praeterita*, focusing on the biographical and psychological elements that led Ruskin to distance himself later from his early veneration of Shakespeare.

tutes a long footnote in which Ruskin outlines the etymologies of the names of some of Shakespeare's main characters. The footnote is inserted at the beginning of paragraph 134, just at the point where Ruskin introduces a long analysis of *The Tempest*, which he declares to be a "hurried note" raised in the text and "which [he] may never have time to expand" (1905: 257). In his later works, Ruskin often made extensive use of textual amplifications that introduced topics which, in spite of their textual marginality — they could hardly fit within the main discourse — were relevant to his preoccupations at the time. His footnotes actually constituted a sort of "memoranda" of topics, themes for his future books, which he hardly ever accomplished, and which future readers could develop.⁶ The whole passage is worth taking into account for several reasons. First of all, paragraph 134, as it appears in the final G. Allen edition, can be regarded as comprising three interrelated texts: the long footnote on etymology plus a long appendix that deals with the origin of words, as well as the text where it is inserted, also intended to be a note. These digressions are therefore inscribed into each other, following and concluding Ruskin's discourse on slavery. A discourse on etymology and literature runs quite consistently through the work: in Chapter 4 we have a Shakespearean etymological note at paragraph 100, in connection with the theme of usury, and as an expansion of the reference to the *Merchant of Venice*; in Chapter 3 we have an abnormal example of a hypertrophic text, whose paragraphs 87-94 were themselves originally a long footnote, longer than the text itself. These paragraphs dealt with the hidden truth contained in the greatest art works, which are compared to prophetic dreams, an image which occurs again in Chapter 5, in the passage on *The Tempest*. In *Munera Pulveris* this multilayered pattern seems to envisage a separation of spheres: in the footnotes and in the texts that were originally meant to be footnotes themselves, Ruskin develops his discourse on literary themes, while the actual, main text — albeit rather scanty in comparison — is devoted to contemporary issues, namely England's economy and government. For Arnold, it was this juxtaposition of different discourses that made Ruskin's essay appear "provincial", and in particular, the fact that Ruskin's digressions on etymologies stemmed

⁶ The critics who have specifically dealt with the subject of the names of Shakespeare's characters, quoting Ruskin as a former authority are Levin (1965: 59-90); and Murray (1978), whose book is an etymological dictionary referring extensively to the *Munera Pulveris* footnotes. Other studies on the subject, which indirectly confirm the validity of Ruskin's hypotheses are: Wilson Knight (1958); Spevack (1993; 1996).

from a discourse dealing with the time-bound present. What we find relevant, instead, is that, in an unquestionably dynamic relationship between text and footnotes, main body and margins, Ruskin's discourse seems also to outline a horizontal symbolical separation of planes: the reference to the present state of the nation is in the text, while the extended literary references are placed in the footnotes, a section which is significantly external and lateral although proportionally wider in physical extension. In Ruskin's cultural metaphysics, this section therefore symbolically represents the dimension of eternal truths, voiced in the obscure dream language of the great works of the Western tradition. Textual and symbolical planes therefore overlap, and Shakespeare's "lesson" as that of Homer, Plato, Dante, and Goethe rests on a plane which is independent from that of the actual world/text, and has only a faint impact on it. Therefore, this method of keeping discourses separate, although contained in the same text, also marks a counterpoint between the eternal ideal plane and the contingent one. This separation, whose Platonic matrix is clear, led Ruskin to make continuous cross-references to the great "dream-works". All works are seen to have stemmed from the same sacred source of a god-inspired imagination and this idea combines, within Ruskin's tentative all-inclusive framework, with a transcendental vision of language described in the long appendix to the chapter. This appendix, which functions as a theoretical statement on his applied etymological exercise, compares language to a river, whose water stems from a unique, and "small" source (1905: 292).

The choral prophetic nature of the great works constitutes the implied theoretical assumption on which Ruskin founded his reading of *The Tempest*, which can be seen as a re-reading of some passages of Plato's *Republic*.⁷ The references are seldom explicit either in Ruskin's own footnotes and in the ones added by the editors of the Library Edition. However, an attentive reading reveals that Ruskin's interpretations of the characters of Ariel and Caliban are an elaboration and a refunctionalization of certain metaphors found in Plato: the marriage of unequals, the distinction between captive and slave, and the image of the escaped convict seeking refuge in the temple.

The first and only explicit reference to Plato in relation to the characters in *The Tempest* occurs at the beginning of paragraph 134, and, I would say, provides the key to the whole passage, inviting us to identify other implicit references to *The Republic*.

⁷ Ruskin's interpretation adds retrospectively some further Platonic echoes to those detected by contemporary criticism on *The Tempest*. P. A. Cantor (2000) has exclusively focused on Prospero as the figure of the Platonic ruler-philosopher.

It recalls the image of the slave who newly washed and dressed wishes to marry his master's daughter, which is likened to "Caliban attacking Prospero's cell" (1905: 257). The passage in Plato (*Republic* VI 495 E) refers to the marriage of unequals as a metaphor which, repeatedly surfacing throughout the passage, represents the man who is attracted to philosophy but does not possess the qualities that would make him a true philosopher. In Ruskin's reading, Plato's tenor — the unfit philosopher — disappears, while the focus remains on the vehicle of the metaphor, the slave, whose nature, as well as the attendant social and moral implications, become the subject of his multidirectional reading of *The Tempest*. The ground of the metaphor, that is the mode of his service, is therefore in focus: Caliban the slave is the personification of "rebellious, hurtful, and slavish labour", as opposed to Ariel's "spirit of faithful and imaginative labour" (1905: 258), since slavery is being contrasted with captivity. The distinction made between slavery and captivity throws up further Platonic echoes, which are reinforced by a quotation from *The Republic* occurring in the middle of his interpretation: "Φαντάσματα θεῶν, καὶ σκιαὶ τῶν ὄντων". Referring to the heuristic value of the great works, the quotation establishes a link with the long footnote in Chapter 4 — implicitly identifying Plato's text as a major sub-text of the whole discourse. Consequently, the definitions of Prospero as "the true governor" and of Sycorax as "the mother of slavery" are reminiscent of Plato's figures of the king and of the tyrant respectively, and the idea of "captivity" in reference to Ariel then recalls Plato's image of the true philosopher "who through inherent goodness or natural reasonableness has had his eyes opened a little and is humbled and taken captive by philosophy" (VI 494 E). In this latter instance, Ruskin seems to have blurred the metaphor's original tenor — the philosopher — by substituting it with the worker, and by focussing again on the underlying quality involved: Ariel is "the spirit of generous free-hearted service", which is "collaborative and obedient" (169).

In the light of Plato's text (IX 572 B), Caliban appears as "the lawless wild-beast nature, which peers out in sleep". The whole Platonic passage deals with the slavery of man devoted to wine and lust, which coincides with the image of the tyrannical man. The image of the enslaved man whose soul is governed by a tyrant is a Platonic metaphor for being subjected to one's own impulses, to the tyranny of a demeaning passion (IX 577), and fits within the Platonic comparison between happiness and rightness on the one hand, and misery and guilt on the other (IX 580 C).

Caliban represents the worker's "aggressive and rebellious" side, and in a long footnote at paragraph 109, which refers proleptically to a discourse he

would never adopt and conclude, the reference to the degradation of the lower orders by mechanical work becomes explicit. Ruskin freely alludes to the classical sources and paraphrases *The Republic*: “Plato opposes such work to noble occupations, not merely as prison is opposed to freedom, but as a convict’s dishonoured prison is to the temple (escape from them being like that of a criminal to the sanctuary)” (1905: 234). His reference is to Book VI. 9, a reference which, bibliographically imprecise, is also an adaptation of the original which modifies its context of discourse. Plato’s passage immediately precedes the one on marriage and deals with the man who is unfit for philosophy and yet, as a convict escaping from prison, takes refuge in a sanctuary. It is a variation on the “marriage of unequals” metaphor, which shows how deeply this passage was rooted in Ruskin’s mind, but also how embarrassing he found the theme of the ancients’ scorn for the lower orders. He reported the “truth” that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare had all stated “that, in great states, the lower orders are low by nature as well as by task, being precisely that part of the commonwealth which has been thrust down for its coarseness and unworthiness” (1905: 234), demonstrating his difficulty in accepting and mentioning it, describing it as “terrific”, “strange and cruel”, and repeatedly stressing the need to be protective and sympathetic towards them.

Ruskin’s reference to the figures of Caliban and Ariel as metaphors for work allowed him to confront and voice the difficult topic of the contemporary working conditions of the poor in England — a final reference to Carlyle, defining them as “the true modern slaves”, potentially makes this explicit. By reworking the tenors of the Platonic metaphors, Ruskin was therefore highlighting the tyrannous, unwise nature of the masses. This is an early articulation of that widely developed identification of Caliban with the marginalization of the “other”, and is more a socio-political allusion than a cultural one, having less to do with Browning’s *Caliban Upon Setebos* (1859), the uncultivated man enquiring about the modes of natural theology, than with Coleridge’s disparaging comparison with a Jacobin in a lecture only partially published in 1811, which provoked a polemical answer from Hazlitt, and which Ruskin could not have known (Coburn 1987: I, 211; Bate 1993: 20).

However, the kind of relationship established by Ruskin’s entire discourse between Shakespeare’s text and the present times was not comparative but metaphorical. If Carlyle, Bagehot and Arnold had drawn a direct correlation between Shakespeare and the cultural values of the nation, respectively sublimating, avoiding, or neutralizing some of his most embar-

raising standpoints, Ruskin's interpretation creates an added layer of meaning which is more disquieting and problematical rather than celebratory and reassuring. Employing rudimentary critical tools, and a non-consequential form of discourse, Ruskin provided a reading of the work that may still constitute something more than a culturally interesting document of Victorian Shakespearean criticism.

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